

EMILY DICKINSON 1830-1886

ALTHOUGH Emily Dickinson never knew it, she was one of the founders of modern American poetry. Strongly influenced by Emerson's ideas and poetry, Dickinson was even more of an individualist than Thoreau. As a young girl, she was shy but was known for her wit and playfulness.

Emily was educated at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Mount Holyoke, which she attended from 1847 to 1848, insisted on religious as well as intellectual growth, and Emily was under considerable pressure to become a professing Christian. She resisted, however, and although many of her poems deal with God, she remained all her life a skeptic. Despite her doubts, she was subject to strong religious feelings, a conflict that lent tension to her writings.

Neither Emily Dickinson, nor her sister Lavinia, who seemed to feel responsible for taking care of her, ever married. There was also a brother, Austin, an attorney, who married Dickinson's closest friend, Susan Gilbert. Emily wrote many passionate letters to Susan and eventually sent over 300 poems to her, in addition to messages, gifts, etc.

The Dickinson family lived in a large house surrounded by meadows. Small and pale, with red-brown hair and dark eyes, Emily Dickinson formed a close emotional attachment to several people who may never have known how important they were to her. Some of her early poems were sent as valentines or included in consolation notes to friends. She was most productive in the early 1860s when she wrote



hundreds of poems every year. There has been much speculation about the identity of the man to whom Dickinson addressed (but probably never sent) her love lyrics. The two leading candidates are Benjamin Newton, who was a law student in her father's office, and Charles Wadsworth, who was a minister. She met Newton when she was eighteen. He moved away from Amherst and later died of tuberculosis in 1853. In 1854, Dickinson met and may have fallen in love with Rev. Wadsworth, who was already married. Their relationship was platonic, but she continued to write to him for many years.

In 1862, Dickinson sent several poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a transcendentalist critic associated with the *Atlantic Monthly*. She wanted his appraisal of her work, but she had no interest in publishing anything. He really didn't understand her works, but he was impressed by them and they continued a correspondence, meeting only once during her life.

As she grew older and more reclusive, her writing became more philosophical. After her father's death in 1874, she seldom left the house. She was fond of children, however, and sometimes lowered baskets of candy or fruit to them from her upstairs window.

Also during the last ten years of her life, Dickinson had something of a relationship with Otis P. Lord, a judge and associate of her later father's, who had recently become a widower. She appears to have been in love with him, but the intensity of her ordinary day-to-day consciousness seems to have left her few reserves to spend on a love affair, much less a marriage.



"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" – Emily Dickinson